

Nan of Music Mountain

By FRANK H. SPEARMAN

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NAN MORGAN GETS A CHANCE TO BETRAY DE SPAIN BUT LEARNS SOMETHING ABOUT HIM THAT MAKES HER DISLOYAL TO HER OWN PEOPLE

The region around Sleepy Cat, a railroad division town in the Rocky mountain mining country, is infested with stage robbers and cattle rustlers, known as the Morgan gang, who hang out in Morgan gap, a fertile valley 20 miles from Sleepy Cat, and near Calabasas, a point where horses are changed on the stage line from the Thief river thence to the railroad. Jeffries, superintendent of the mountain division, sends Henry de Spain, with John LeFevre and Bob Scott as assistants, to Calabasas to break up the gang. Several encounters occur soon afterward. De Spain becomes smitten with Nan Morgan, niece of the gang leader, but is snubbed. In a memorable fight, De Spain, cornered by four outlaws, kills two and wounds two and is himself badly hurt. He disappears. His friends hunt him in vain. A day or two later De Spain awakes in a cave. He does not know his own whereabouts.

CHAPTER X—Continued.

The violent exertion of reaching the height had started the ruptured artery anew, and his first work was crudely to cleanse the wound and attempt to rebandage it. He was hungry, but for this there was only one alleviation—sleep—and, carefully effacing all traces of his presence on the ledge, he crawled into his rock retreat and fell again into a heavy slumber.

It was this repose that proved his undoing. He woke to consciousness so weak he could scarcely lift his head. It was still day. A consuming thirst assailed him, but he lacked the strength to crawl out of his cave, and, looking toward his beleaguered foot, he was shocked at the sight of how it had bled while he slept.

Toward afternoon his restlessness increased, but he clung to his resolve to lie still. By evening he was burning with thirst, and when morning came after a feverish night, with his head on fire and his mouth crusty dry, he concluded rightly that one or both of his wounds had become infected.

De Spain understood what it meant. He looked regretfully at the injured foot. Swollen out of shape and angry-looking, the mere appearance would have told him, had the confirmation been needed, that his situation was becoming critical. This did not so much disconcert him as it surprised him and spurred him mentally to the necessity of new measures. He lay a long time thinking. Against the infection he could do little. But the one aid at his hand was abundance of cold water to drink and bathe his wound in, and to this he resolved now to drag himself. To crawl across the space that separated him from the pool required all the strength he could summon. The sun was already well up and its rays shot like spectrum arrows through the spray of the dainty cataract, which spouted in a jeweled sheet over a rocky ledge twenty feet above and poured noisily down from the broad pool along jagged boulders below.

Crawling, choking with thirst, slowly forward, he reached the water, and, reclining on his side and one elbow, he was about to lean down to drink when he suddenly felt, with some kind of an instinctive shock, that he was no longer alone on the ledge. He had no interest in analyzing the conviction; he did not even question it. Not a sound



He Looked Regretfully at His Injured Foot.

had reached his ears. Only a moment before he had looked carefully all around. But the field of his vision was closely circumscribed by the walls about him. It was easy for an invader to come on his retreat unawares—at all events, somebody, he was almost sure, stood behind him. The silence meant an enemy. The first thing to expect was a bullet. It would probably be aimed at the back of his head. At least he knew this was the spot to aim for to kill a man instantly and

pointlessly—yet he shrank from that anticipated crash.

His thoughts, working in flashes of lightning, suggested every possible trick of escape, and as rapidly rejected each. There was nothing for it but to play the part, to take the blow with no more than a quiver when it came. He had once seen a man shot in just that way. Placed to such a determination, De Spain bent slowly downward, and, with eyes staring into the water for a reflection that might afford a glimpse of his enemy, he began to drink. Each mouthful of water was a struggle. The sense of impending death had not even the life-giving drafts of their tonic; each instant carried its acute sensation of being the last. At length, his nerves weakened by hunger and exposure, revolted under the strain. Suppose it should be, after all, a fantasy of his fever that pictured so vividly an enemy behind. With an effort that cost more mental torture than he ever had known, he drew back on his elbow from the pool, steadied himself, turned his head to face his executioner, and confronted Nan Morgan.

CHAPTER XI.

Parley.

She stood beside the rock from which the ledge was reached from below, and as if she had just stepped up into sight. Her rifle was so held in both hands that it could be fired from her hip, and at such close quarters with deadly accuracy. As she stood with startled eyes fixed on his haggard face, her slender neck and poised head were very familiar to De Spain.

And her expression, while it reflected her horrified alarm, did not conceal her anger and aversion at the sight of him. Unaware of the forbidding spectacle he presented, De Spain, swept by a brainstorm at the appearance of this Morgan—the only one of all the Morgans he had not fancied covering him and waiting to deliver his death warrant—felt a fury sweep over him at the wild thought that she meant to kill him.

Whatever she meant to do, he could no more fire at this girl, even had he a chance—and he realized he was at her mercy—than he could at his sister; and he lay with his eyes bent on hers, trying to read her purpose. He read in her face only abhorrence and condemnation, and felt in no way moved to argue her verdict. "I suppose," he said, at length, not trying to disguise his bitter resentment of her presence, "you've come to finish me."

His shirt stained and tattered for bandages, his hair matted in blood on his forehead, his eyes inflamed and swollen, his lips crusty and swollen, the birthmark fastened vividly on his cheek, made him a desperate sight. Regarding him steadily, Nan, as bewildered as if she had suddenly come on a great wounded beast of prey still dangerous, made no response to his words. The two stared at each other defiantly and for another moment in silence. "If you are going to kill me," he continued, looking into her eyes without any thought of appeal, "do it quick."

Something in his long, unyielding gaze impelled her to break the spell of it. "What are you doing here?" she demanded with anger, curbing her voice to control her excitement as best she could.

De Spain, still looking at her, answered only after a pause. "Hiding," he said harshly.

"Hiding to kill other men?" Nan's accusation as she clutched her rifle was almost explosive.

He regarded her coolly, and with the interval he had had for thinking, his wits were clearing. "Do I look like a man hunting for a fight? Or," he added, seeing she made no answer, "like a man hunting for a quiet spot to die in?"

"I know you are a murderer."

In spite of his weakness he flushed. "No," he exclaimed sharply. "I'm not a murderer. If you think it," he pointed contemptuously to her side—"you have your rifle—use it!"

"You came here to hide to kill somebody?" she exclaimed.

"What do you mean by here? I

might better ask why you came here," he retorted. "I don't know where I am. Do I look as if I came here by choice?" He paused. "Listen," he said, quite master of himself. "I'll tell you why I came. I shall never get away alive, anyway—you can have the truth if you want it. I got off my horse in the night to get a drink. He bolted. I couldn't walk. I climbed up here to hide till my wounds heal. Now, I've told you the truth. Where am I?"

The grip of her hands on the rifle might have relaxed somewhat, but she saw his deadly revolver in its accustomed place and did not mean to surrender her command of him. Nor would she tell him where he was. She parried his questions. He could get no information of any sort out of her. Yet he saw that something more than his mere presence detained and perplexed her. Her prompt condemnation of him rankled in his mind, and the strain of facing her suspicion wore on him. "I won't ask you anything more," he said at length. "You think I've no right to live—that's what you think, isn't it? Why don't you shoot?" She only stared at him. "Why don't you answer?" he demanded recklessly.

Nan summoned her resolution. "I know you tried to kill my cousin," she said hotly, after he had taunted her once more. "And I am going to think what to do before I tell you anything or do anything."

"You know I tried to kill your cousin. You know nothing of the kind. Your cousin tried to kill me. How a bully and a coward, a man that doesn't know what fair fighting means."

"You're safe in abusing him when he's not here."

"Send him to me!" His voice shook with anger. "Tell him I'm wounded; tell him I've had nothing to eat since I fought him before. And if he's still afraid"—De Spain drew and broke his revolver almost like a flash. In that incredibly quick instant she realized he might have threatened her life before she could move a muscle—"tell your fine cousin I've got one cartridge left—just one!" So saying, he held in one hand the loaded cartridge and in the other the empty revolver.

"You've asked me to go—I'm going. How much of what you tell me is true, I don't know. But I can believe my own eyes, and I believe you are not in condition to do much injury, even if you came here with that intention. You were certainly here with that intention when you hid from me."

She started away. He leaned toward her. "Stop," he said peremptorily, raising himself with a wrenching effort. Something in the stern eye held her. His extended hand pointed toward her as arbitrarily as if, instead of lying helpless at his feet, he could command her to his bidding. "I want to ask you a question. I've told you the truth. I have just one cartridge. If you are going to send your cousin and his men here to fight, do you want the proof? I'll tell you—I wouldn't want anybody else to know—will you keep it?"

Nan seemed indifferent. "Girls are not supposed to keep secrets," she said obstinately.

Her narrator was not to be balked. He pointed to the cartridge on the wall in front of them both. "There is Henry de Spain's coat. He hung it there just before he went down to the inn. Under it, if you look, you'll find his belt of cartridges. Don't take my word—look for yourself."

Giving this information to sink in, McAlpin continued. Nan's eyes had turned, despite her indifference, to the coat; but she was thinking more intently about the belt which McAlpin asserted hung under it. "You want to know what he did go down to the hotel for that afternoon? I happen to know that, too," averred McAlpin, sitting down, but respectfully, on the edge of the chair. "First I want to say this: I worked for your Uncle Duke five years."

He paused to give Nan a chance to dispute the statement if she so desired. Then, taking her despairing silence as an endorsement of his position in giving her a confidence, he went on: "Henry de Spain is dead," he said quietly. She eyed him without so much as winking. "I wouldn't tell it, if he wasn't. The boy's dead. And he was always talking about you. It's God's truth, and since he's dead it harms no one to tell it to you, though I'd never breathe it to another. He was fairly gone on you."

"You don't have to knock me down, Miss Nan, to put me wise about a man's being keen on a girl. I'm a married man," declared McAlpin with modest pride. "He thought all the time he was fooling me, and keeping covered. Now, that afternoon he came in here kind of moody. It was an anniversary for him, and a hard one—the day his father was shot from ambush—a good many years ago, but nary one of us had forgot it. Then he happened to see your pony—that same pony you're riding today—standing back there in the box-stall. He asked me whose it was; and he asked me about you, and, by jinx! the

dies of the Spanish sinks. Where he lay he could, if he meditated revenge on her people, murder any of them, almost at will. To spare his life inflicted on this extent theirs—but surely he lay not far from death by exhaustion. And if he was not helped soon he would die.

But who was to help him? Certainly none of his friends. If she told them they would try to reach him. That would mean an appalling—an unthinkable—fight. All came back to one terrifying alternative: Should she help this wretched man herself? And if he lived, would he repay her by shooting someone of her own kin?

The long ride to Calabasas went fast as the debate swept on, and the vivid shock of her strange experience recurred to her imagination.

She drew up before the big barn. Jim McAlpin was coming out to go to supper. Nan asked for her package and wanted to start directly back again. McAlpin refused absolutely to hear of it. He looked at her horse and professed to be shocked. He told her she had ridden hard, urged her to dismount, and sent her pony in to be rubbed. While her horse was cared for, McAlpin asked, in his harmless Scotch way, about Gale.

Concerning Gale, Nan was noncommittal. But she listened with interest, more or less veiled, to whatever running comment McAlpin had to offer concerning the Calabasas fight. "And I was sorry to see Gale mixed up in it," he concluded, in his effort to draw Nan out. "Sorry. And sorrier to think of Henry de Spain getting killed that way. Same way," he suggested, looking significantly toward the door of the barn, and significantly away again.



"It's Only Fair I Should Know It Now—Isn't It?"

"That Henry went down there to pick a fight with the boys. But," he asserted cryptically, "I happen to know that wasn't so."

"Then what did he go down there for?" demanded Nan indignantly, but not warily.

McAlpin, the situation now in hand, took his time to it. He leaned forward in a manner calculated to invite confidence without giving offense. "Miss Nan," said he simply, "Henry de Spain was here, with me, sitting right there where you are sitting, in that chair, not fifteen minutes before that fight began. I told you he never went down there to fight. Do you want the proof? I'll tell you—I wouldn't want anybody else to know—will you keep it?"

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way he perked up when I told him you were coming in on the stage that afternoon! When he heard you'd been sick, he was for going down to the hotel to get a cup of coffee—for you!" McAlpin, like any good story-teller, was already on his feet again. "He did it," he exclaimed, "and you know what he got when he stepped into the barroom." He took hold of De Spain's coat and held it aside to enter his exhibit. "There," he concluded, "is his cartridge belt, hanging there yet. The boy is dead—why shouldn't I tell you?"

Nan rode home much more excited, more bewildered than when she had ridden over. Strangest shock of all that this man of all other men should profess to care for her. She had shown anger when McAlpin dared speak of it; at least, she thought she had. And she still did not know how sufficiently to resent the thought of such audacity on De Spain's part. This was, to say the least, a further awkward complication for her feelings. She already had enough to confuse them.

CHAPTER XII.

Nan Drifts.

Without going in to speak to Gale, whom Bull Page, his nurse, reported very cross but not hurt much, Nan left her packet for him and rode home. Her Uncle Duke was in town. She had the house to herself, with only Bonita, the old Mexican serving woman, and Nan ate her late supper alone.

The longer she pondered on De Spain and his dilemma—and her own—the more she worried. When she went to bed, upstairs in her little guest room, she tossed on her pillow till a resolve seized her to go up again to his hiding place and see what she could see or hear—possibly, if one were on foot, she could uncover a plot.

She dressed resolutely, buckled on a holster to her side, and slipping a revolver—a new one that Gale had given her—into it for protection, she walked softly downstairs and out of doors. The night air was clear, with a three-quarter moon well up in the sky. She took her way rapidly along the trail to the mountain, keeping as much as possible within the great shadows cast by the towering peaks.

Breathing steadily and keened to a tense feeling of uncertainty and suspicion, Nan at length reached without adventure the corner of the ledge where she had first seen De Spain, and there, lying flat, listened.

Hearing only the noise of the little cascade, she swept the ledge as well as she could with her eyes, but it was now so far in shadow as to be impenetrable darkness. Hardly daring to breathe, she crept and felt her way over it with her hands, discovering nothing until she had almost reached De Spain's retreat at the farther side. Then her heart stopped in an agony of fear—underneath the overhanging wall she heard voices. De Spain had confederates, then, and had tricked her, after all.

But a moment later this explanation failed to satisfy her. The mutterings were too constant and too disconnected—it dawned on Nan that this must be delirium. She could hear De Spain throwing himself from side to side, and the near and far sounds, as if of two voices, were explained. She crept nearer.

He was babbling in the chill darkness about ammunition, urging men to make haste, warning them of someone coming. Nan listened to his ravings, overcome by the revelation of his condition. She told herself he must die if he remained longer unaided, and there were unpleasant possibilities, if he died where he lay. She did not want to pity or to help him, she convinced herself; but she did not want his death laid to a Morgan plot—for none of his friends would ever believe De Spain had found his way alive and alone to where he lay.

All of this Nan was casting up in her mind as she walked home. She had already decided, but without realizing it, what to do, and was willing to assume that her mind was still open.

Toward daylight of the morning, De Spain dreamed he was not alone—that a figure moved silently in the faintness of the dawn—a figure he struggled to believe a reality, but one that tricked his wandering senses and left him, at the coming of another day, weaker, with failing courage, and alone.

How De Spain makes friends with Nan and how she deceives her people in order to protect him, is told vividly in the next installment.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

New Job for Derelicts.

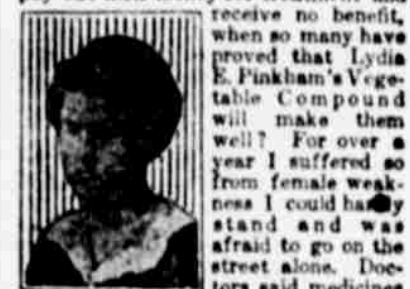
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